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1914

OLD PARIS

by
Charles
Méryon



WITH AN ESSAY BY
Philip GILBERT HAMERTON

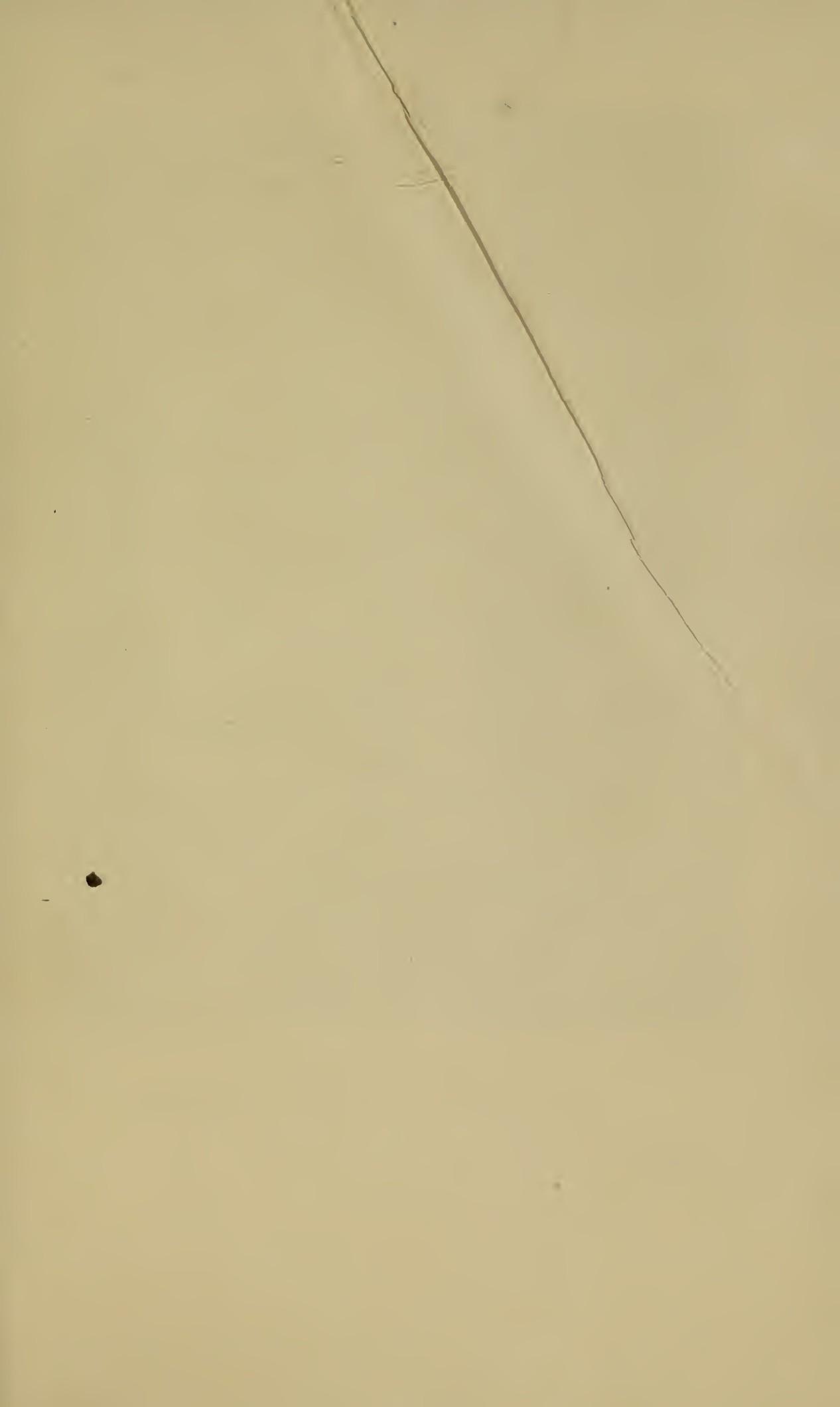
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OLD PARIS



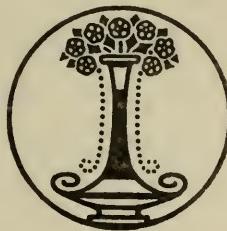


LE STRYGE

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OLD PARIS

TWENTY ETCHINGS BY
CHARLES MÉRYON
WITH AN ESSAY ON THE ETCHER BY
PHILIP GILBERT HAMERTON



LIVERPOOL
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1914

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THE case of Charles Méryon is one of those painful ones which recur in every generation to prove the fallibility of the popular judgment. Méryon is one of the greatest and most original artists who have appeared in Europe; he is one of the immortals; his name will be inscribed on the noble roll where Dürer and Rembrandt live for ever. An intelligent writer upon art said, not very long ago, that artists had no occasion to complain of the public, because, if the matter were inquired into, it would be found that every artist had his own public. This is, no doubt, in a certain sense true; every writer and every artist is appreciated by somebody, if only he has some sort of talent and accomplishment; but for an author or an etcher to live by his work he needs more than this little group of friends. Three customers will keep a painter from starving for a year, but no composer of printed matter could live if he had only three readers. An etcher is a composer of printed matter, and he needs a public sufficiently large to remunerate him adequately for his time—that is, at least two hundred regular

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buyers. Now, to find two hundred regular buyers he requires ten times that number of students and admirers; and it is not always easy to excite the serious interest of two thousand people. A public which is not extensive enough to enable its favourite to live by his labour, is for all practical purposes not a public at all; and it is in vain to tell an author that he is unreasonable to wish for more than a hundred readers, or an etcher that he is foolishly anxious for notoriety when he is not satisfied with the approbation of the cultivated few. The suffrage of the cultivated few is very desirable, and there is more intellectual and artistic encouragement in the quiet praise of ten competent persons, than in the applause of multitudes; but the very love of art itself compels an artist to wish for a public not only educated, but numerous; because, without either a numerous public or independent private fortune, he cannot continue to work. Méryon has been sorely tried by public and national indifference, and in a moment of bitter discouragement he destroyed the most magnificent series of his plates. When we think of the scores of mediocre engravers of all kinds, who, without one ray of imagination, live decently and contentedly by their trade, and then of this rare and sublime genius actually ploughing deep burin lines across his inspired work, because

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no man regarded it; and when we remember that this took place in Paris, in our enlightened nineteenth century, it makes one doubt whether, after all, we are much better than savages or barbarians. Now that plates can be preserved by steeling, the etchings of a man like Méryon would sell by tens of thousands if the world knew their value; but when such work as this is set before modern society, it is a setting of pearls—&c.

Méryon was born in Paris in 1821, and his father was an Englishman. Much of the unusual delicacy of perception which distinguishes him as an artist, is attributed by M. Burty to maternal influence. He studied mathematics with much industry and application, and entered in 1837 the naval school of Brest. As a naval officer he visited many remote shores, sailing even round the world, and always employing his leisure hours in sketching everything of interest that came in his way. But, though Méryon loved the sea, and had a fraternal affection for sailors, his health was not robust enough for a life of that kind, and he was obliged to abandon his profession. Being already an intelligent practical amateur, he endeavoured to become an artist; and, with the intention of adopting painting as a profession, took lessons of M. Phellippe, a former pupil of David. As a painter, Méryon did not succeed,

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probably from anxiety to produce pictures without the necessary technical education. Whilst suffering from disappointment in this ambition, he happened to meet with M. Eugène Bléry, who directed his attention to etching. Méryon studied etching for several months with M. Bléry, and employed this time fruitfully in the analysis of plates by the elder masters, which he copied as exercises. This preliminary study was followed by excursions in Normandy and a visit to Bourges, a picturesque old city not very far south of the Loire.

Before undertaking the series of original etchings on which his fame will rest, Méryon laboriously employed the art in the translation of other men's work, or in the execution of more or less uncongenial commissions. What developed Méryon was his passionate wish to preserve some adequate memorial of that picturesque old city of Paris which has disappeared before the constructive activity of Haussmann and Louis Napoleon. If old Paris had been likely to remain a generation or two longer, it is possible that we might scarcely have heard of Méryon, because half the quality of his work is due to the intensity of his affection for remains whose destruction he foresaw with the most bitter regret, as a near and irremediable misfortune which he had no power to avert. But if an artist cannot save an

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old building which he loves, he may at least secure a memorial of it, a memorial better than the fidelity of the photograph, because it expresses not only the beauty of the thing itself, but the pathetic affection of the one human soul that cares for it. It became, then, the object of this artist to make a series of etchings in which the old *tourelles* and quaint streets of Paris should be preserved for future times, and when he undertook this task he had already made himself the most accomplished architectural etcher, not only of this century, but of all centuries; not only of France, but of the world. The opportunity for the exercise of Imperial encouragement was exceptional and splendid; and if the Government had known its duty, Méryon would have been commissioned to do perfectly, and on a far more extensive scale, what he did imperfectly in the face of absolute public indifference, and the stern possibility of starvation. To do the French Government justice, it knew the value of another extraordinary man, Jules Jacquemart, and employed him precisely on the kind of work for which nature intended him; but it was less necessary to etch the guarded treasures of the Louvre, which are kept in perfect safety, than the habitations of the nation's forefathers, habitations which private interest or public order is levelling day by day.

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So, without encouragement of any kind, this great artist patiently laboured, etching with the strangest and most novel union of sobriety of manner with depth of poetical feeling. He printed a few copies of his plates, and left them with different booksellers and dealers in engraving; but the stream of life rolled past in its ceaseless flow, and paid as much attention to these jewels as the waves of the Mississippi give to some lost treasure on its banks.

As an etcher Méryon is remarkable for great certainty of hand combined with extraordinary caution. When at work from nature, he stands, and without support of any kind, holds both plate and mirror in one hand, laying the lines with the other, and so steadily that the most skilful etchers marvel at his skill. No work ever done in the world has been more absolutely honest, more free from executive affectation or pride of method. He has great subtlety and delicacy of observation, and a perception of truth so clear that it is strange how such bright insight can be compatible with any cloud or malady of the mind. His work is sanity itself, by its perfect and equal acceptance of various facts, by its patience and steadiness in study, by its caution and moderation in manner. Thus, as I pointed out some years ago, Méryon is picturesque, but not narrowly and exclusively picturesque; for

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when a pure line occurs in a modern or Renaissance building, he gives it with marked attention to its especial quality of purity. It is, perhaps, to this very capacity for appreciating purity that a certain peculiarity of Méryon may be due, which has occasioned a doubt whether he ought to be considered a great etcher, in the strict sense, or a great original engraver. He does not sketch so much or so freely as good etchers usually do, and there is a severity in his manner not always compatible with the ease of true etching. Nevertheless, I class him amongst true etchers on account of his frank use of the explanatory line, which is the chief test; added burin or dry-point work does not prove impotence with the etching-point, and is little more than a sort of glaze.

Considered psychologically, the work of Méryon is highly curious. It is thoughtful, reflective, intensely personal, and full of strange hints of a passionate fantasy, secret and subdued. This mental quality, far more than the manual dexterity of the artist, is the secret of his inexhaustible charm. He is a sort of enigma for us, which we are always trying to solve. Victor Hugo, with the clear eye of a poet, saw at once this mental fascination, and saw that Méryon needed to be strengthened by all possible encouragements in his great struggle with

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the Infinite—the infinite of Paris, the infinite of the sea. This was said in Victor Hugo's peculiar way—he can never write without some allusion to the Infinite or the ocean—but in this case the word was not inapplicable. Méryon has evidently been an artist of vast and vague aspirations, though a dull critic might be prevented from seeing this by the unusual precision of his manner. Beyond the actual buildings which he draws there are suggestions of long and lonely meditation on life and nature, on time and space, and the bewildering abysses of immensity.

Le Stryge.—At an angle of one of the towers of Notre-Dame there is a horned and winged demon who perpetually contemplates Paris, his head resting on his hands, and his elbows on a flat ledge of stone. He looks down the Seine towards the pavilions of the Tuilleries, and his stony eyes have watched through the long centuries the changes on its banks. The face wears an expression of quiet and contented observation; from the Middle Ages, when this demon first looked from his lofty post, there has been sin enough in the great city to afford him uninterrupted satisfaction. He saw the massacre of St. Bartholomew, and felt warm gladness in his heart of stone whilst the chants of thanksgiving rose musically in the choir below; nor was he less in-

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wardly gratified when the slow processions of carts took the nobles to the guillotine and the chanting priests were silenced. Those uncouth ears have heard the roar and tumult of revolution, and the clamour of the near bells that shook the grey towers in the hour of triumph, when the versatile priesthood praised God and the powers that be. Nor have public crimes or public miseries been the demon's only consolation. Night after night he hears the low splash when the suicide leaps into the water, and a steady continuous murmur of long lamentation and blasphemy.

When Méryon took the Stryge for a subject, it was with ideas of this kind. If we deduct the malignant feeling which may be attributed to a demon, the position of one who, from a lofty height, surveys the life of a great city, is simply the position of genius relatively to the multitude of men. And Méryon himself, who is a genius of the order most given to reflection and solitude, has not drawn his demon without some considerable amount of sympathy. Four ravens are flying about him in the free air, like the dark and morbid thoughts that visit a lofty but too much isolated mind; and thus, as we know, has Méryon been himself assailed.

I am not quite sure whether the obviously false tonality of this plate may not have been intentional,

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as the same fault certainly was in some engravings of Albert Dürer; but when a critic allows these things to pass in a work which he admires, his silence may be imputed to ignorance. The intense black in the street under the tower of St. Jacques destroys the impression of atmosphere; though at a considerable distance it is as dark as the nearest raven's wing, which cannot relieve itself against it. This *may* have been done in order to obtain a certain arrangement of black and white patches, but it seems unfortunate and is certainly untrue. The tower of St. Jacques is, however, very right and beautiful, and so is the curious distance over the roofs.

La Pompe Notre-Dame.—If the reader will refer to Turner's "Rivers of France," he will find a subject called "The Hôtel de Ville and Pont d'Arcole," in which the picturesque object that engaged Turner's attention and induced him to make the drawing is evidently a curious building in the middle of the river, and in the centre of the composition. This building consists of a tower and two wings, and it is entirely supported on a sub-structure of wooden scaffolding. This is the pump which has furnished a subject for Méryon. His remarkable precision of hand, and his usually wise moderation in light and shade, have never been better exemplified. Take, for example, the exquisitely gentle curvature in the

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three main lines of the tower, and the entire absence of exaggerated blackness throughout the whole plate. Many of the wall surfaces are in the shade, but it is shade illuminated by reflection. The intricate arrangement of the massive carpentry is expressed with evident enjoyment and a strong sense of construction.

L'Abside de Notre-Dame de Paris.—The tonality here is somewhat less accurate than in the plate just criticised, but the questionable passages are chiefly in the bridge and houses; and the cathedral is a wonderful piece of work. There are, no doubt, many living engravers who could get quite safely through pieces of architecture not less elaborate, and many photographs have been taken from this very position which, as copies of the building, are much more mechanically perfect. The value of work of this kind is due to an exquisite artistic sensitiveness, which has presented the subject to us in such a way as to give it poetical interest.

Tourelle, rue de la Tixeranderie, démolie en 1851.—The general reader may feel interested in this plate on account of its subject, which is one of those picturesque corner-turrets that the Scottish architects borrowed from the French, and which give so much character to many an old tower north of the Tweed. This was one of the finest examples which had

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escaped destruction down to the middle of the present century, and its demolition coincided with the erection of the first Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. From the artistic point of view this *tourelle* was worth considerably more than Sir Joseph Paxton's enormous shed, but its disappearance was not thought an event of much importance, except by a few eccentric people, like Méryon, who do not always estimate things by a tariff of material values. Readers who intend to etch may find here much profitable study in the explanatory use of lines which constantly follow either the perspective of surfaces or the direction of shadows; and the plate has the additional advantage of showing, in a marked degree, how moderate and refined is Méryon's understanding of the picturesque. The stately turret and the free foliage of the vine about its base would have had charms for any sketcher, but Méryon alone could have seen the full artistic availability of the modern chimneys and roof, and the contrasting value of the ugly modern house to the left. The explanatory use of line has, in one point, been carried a little too far. There is an attempt to render the appearance of wood, by a somewhat puerile imitation of its grain. It may be observed also that Méryon's readiness to accept unpicturesque material has made him a little too tolerant, when he gives us the bit of

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wall in the foreground forming an acute-angled triangle of the most painfully mechanical sort.

La Rue des Toiles, Bourges.—It is not easy to procure the etchings of Méryon, which, for the most part, are out of print, the plates having been destroyed; but the “Rue des Toiles” was given by the etcher to a friend of his, and I hired the copper for “The Fine Arts Quarterly Review,” in which it appeared in January 1864. The subject is a picturesque mediæval street; and though the etching is not so good as those mentioned above—for it has been over-bitten, and there is some confusion in the tonality—it gives, nevertheless, an idea of Méryon’s qualities as a mediævalist. Victor Hugo is known to be one of his warmest admirers, and these quaint details have much in common with Hugo’s picturesque descriptions.

Le Pont Neuf.—Early proofs of the latest state in which all the dry-point work is given, show Méryon quite at his best. The Pont Neuf is the most picturesque of existing Parisian bridges; and however superfluous its projecting turrets may have seemed to the utilitarian mind, they were always delightful to artists. This plate has been engraved for no other purpose than to show two of these turrets to the very best possible advantage; they are in full sunshine whilst all the rest of the plate is

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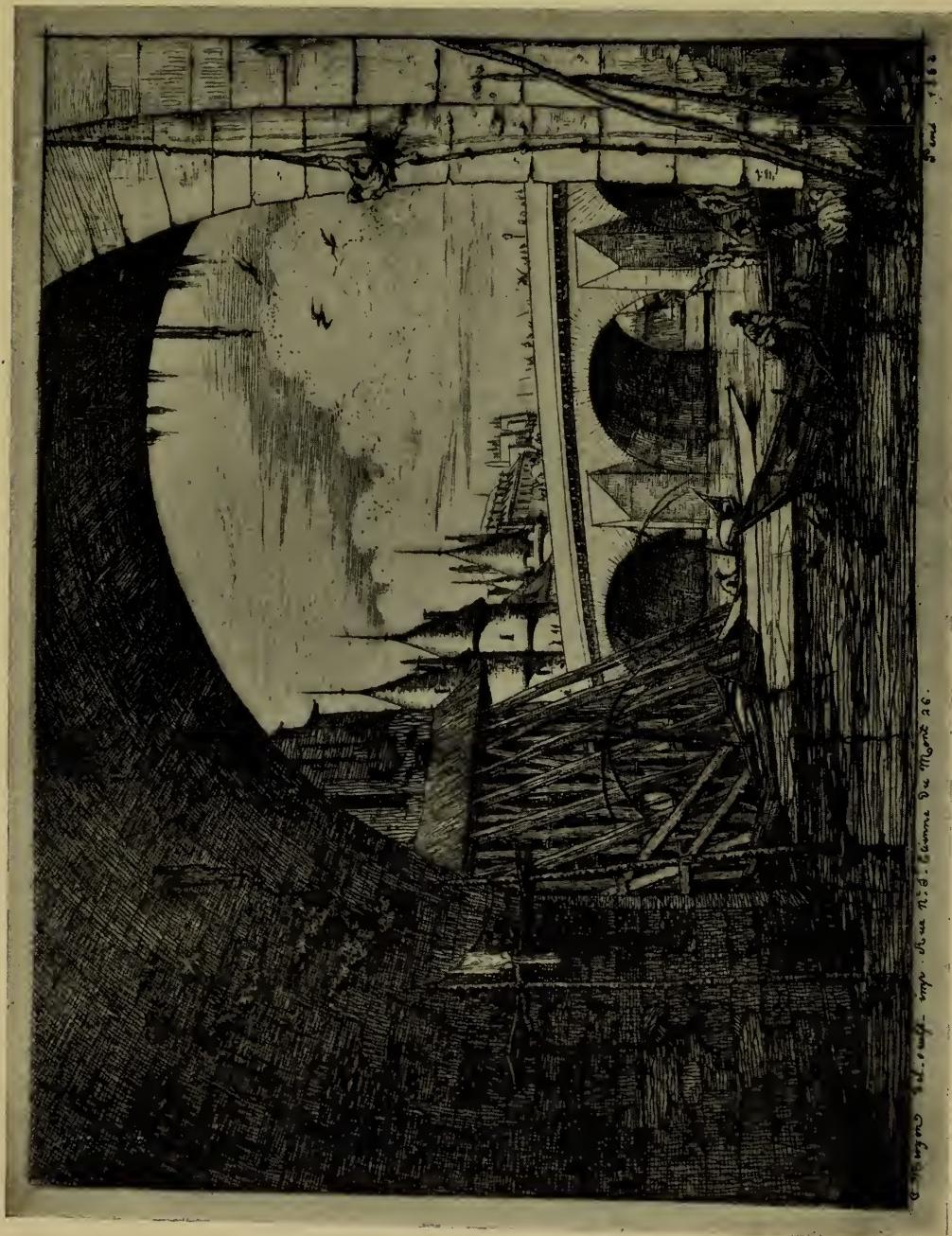
either in subdued middle tint or sombre depths of shade. From the impenetrable gloom under the massive arches to the aerial delicacy of the distant street, there is the widest range of executive resource; but whatever has been done either in massive arch, or flowing water, or many-storeyed houses, or clouded space of sky, has been done always in honour of those two turrets on the bridge. Even the third turret, that nearest us, has been sacrificed to them and cast into intentional shade; and when Méryon comes to the rounding of the far projecting cornice, where the gleam of sunshine falls, he follows every reflection with an indescribable pleasure and care. The wonder is that the delighted hand could work so firmly here, that it did not tremble with the eagerness of its emotion and fail at the very instant of fruition.

EAUX-FORTES
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PARIS
par
CHERRIOT.
MDCCCLX.

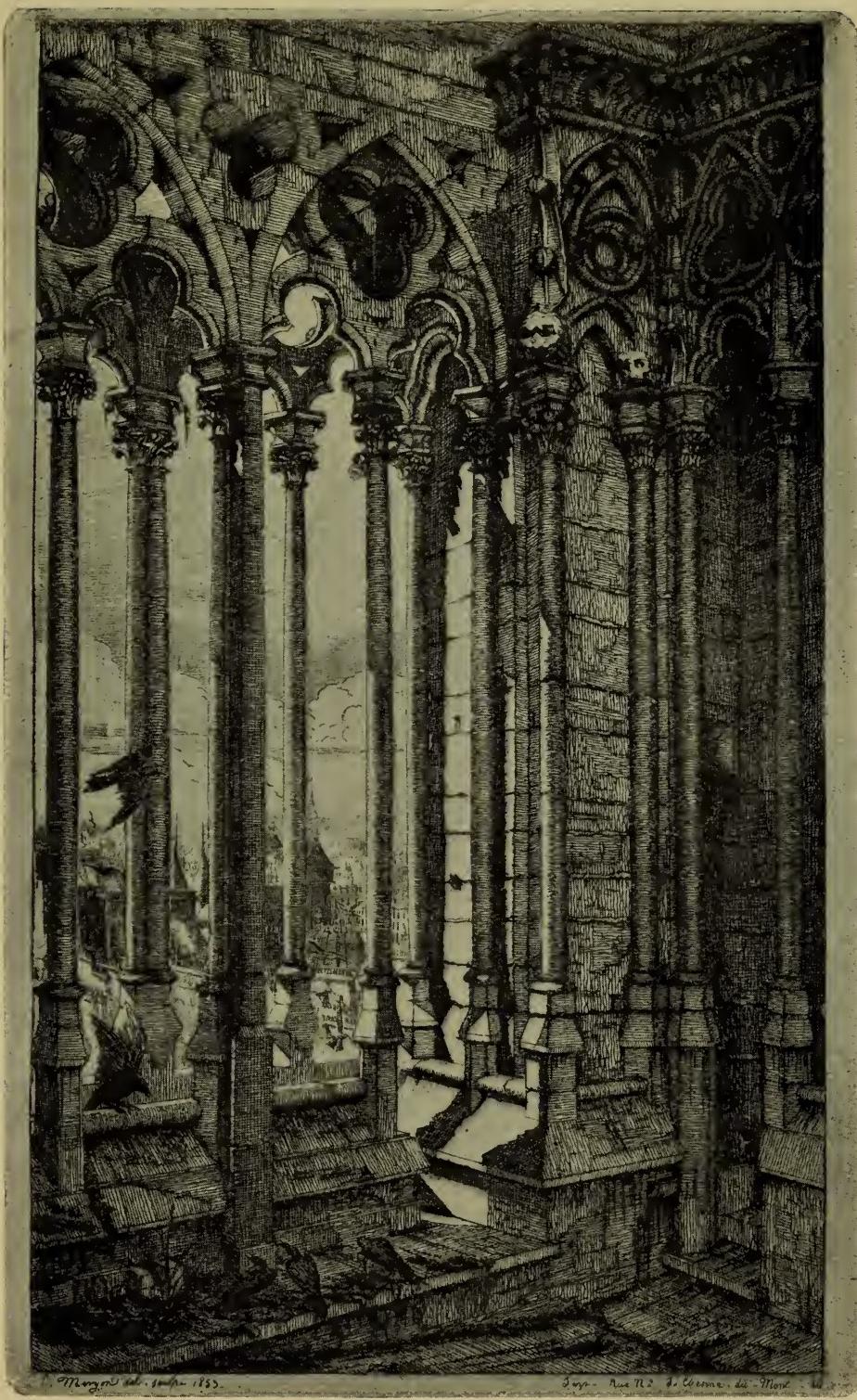
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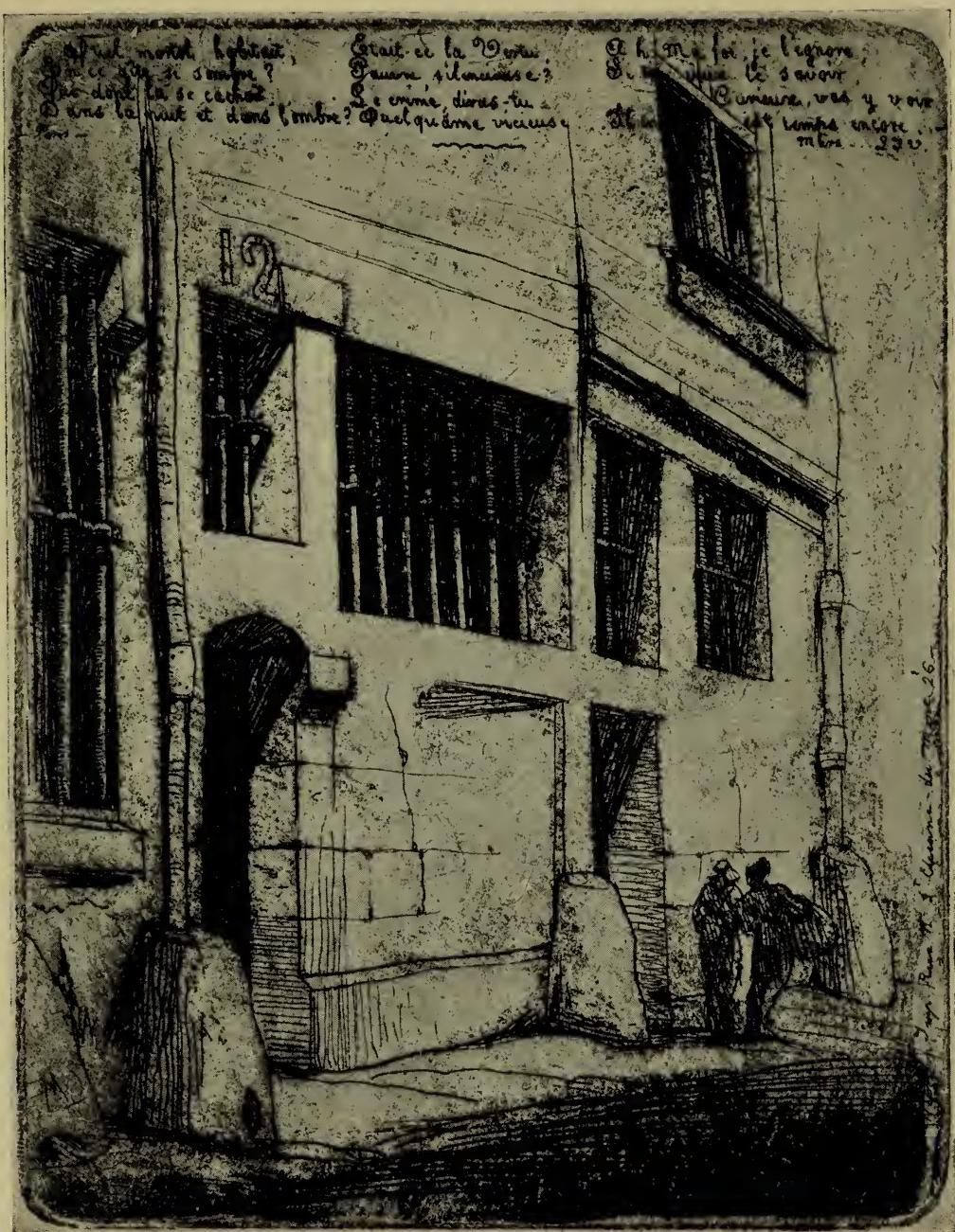
III. LE PETIT PONT.



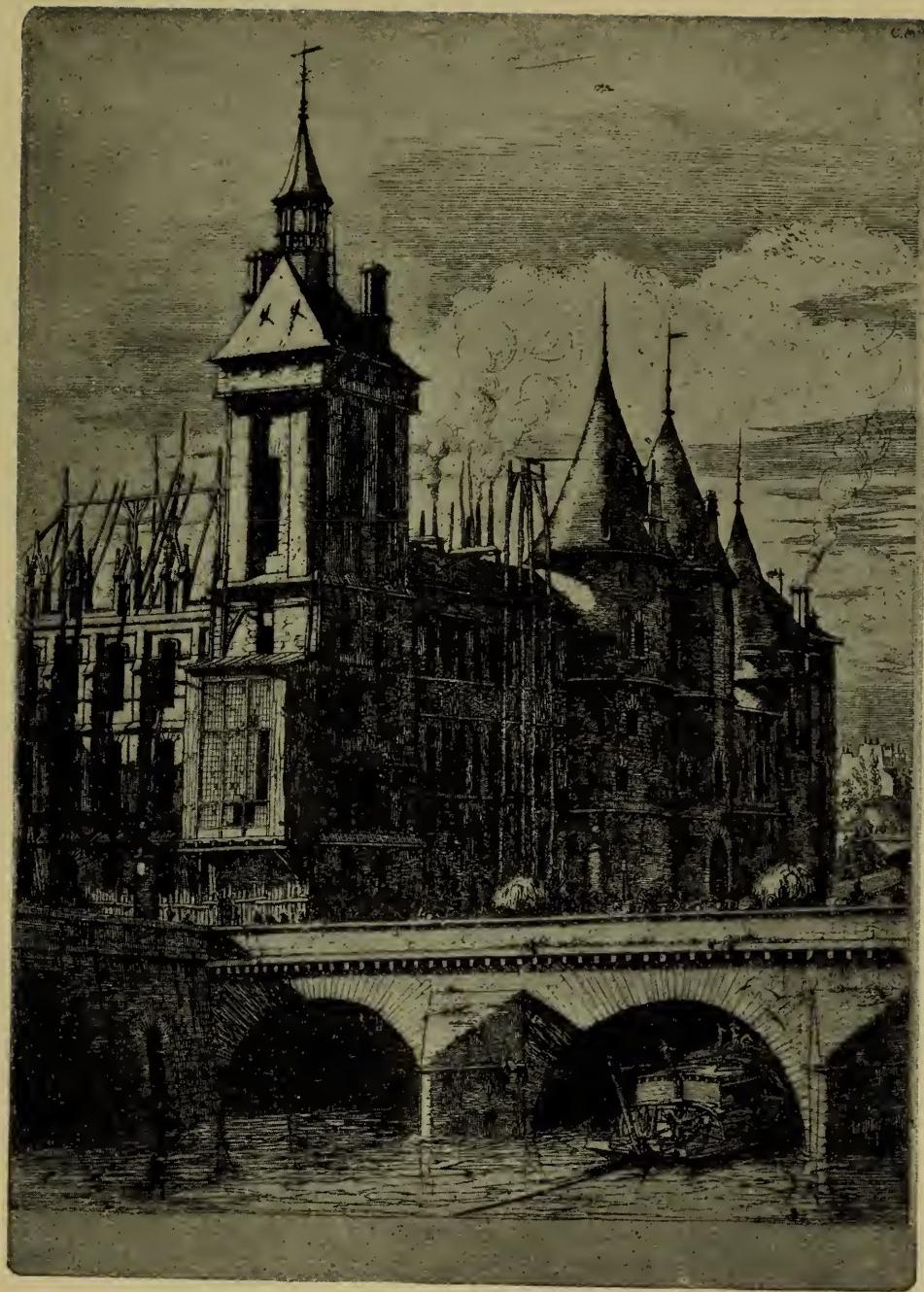
IV. L'ARCHE DU PONT NOTRE-DAME



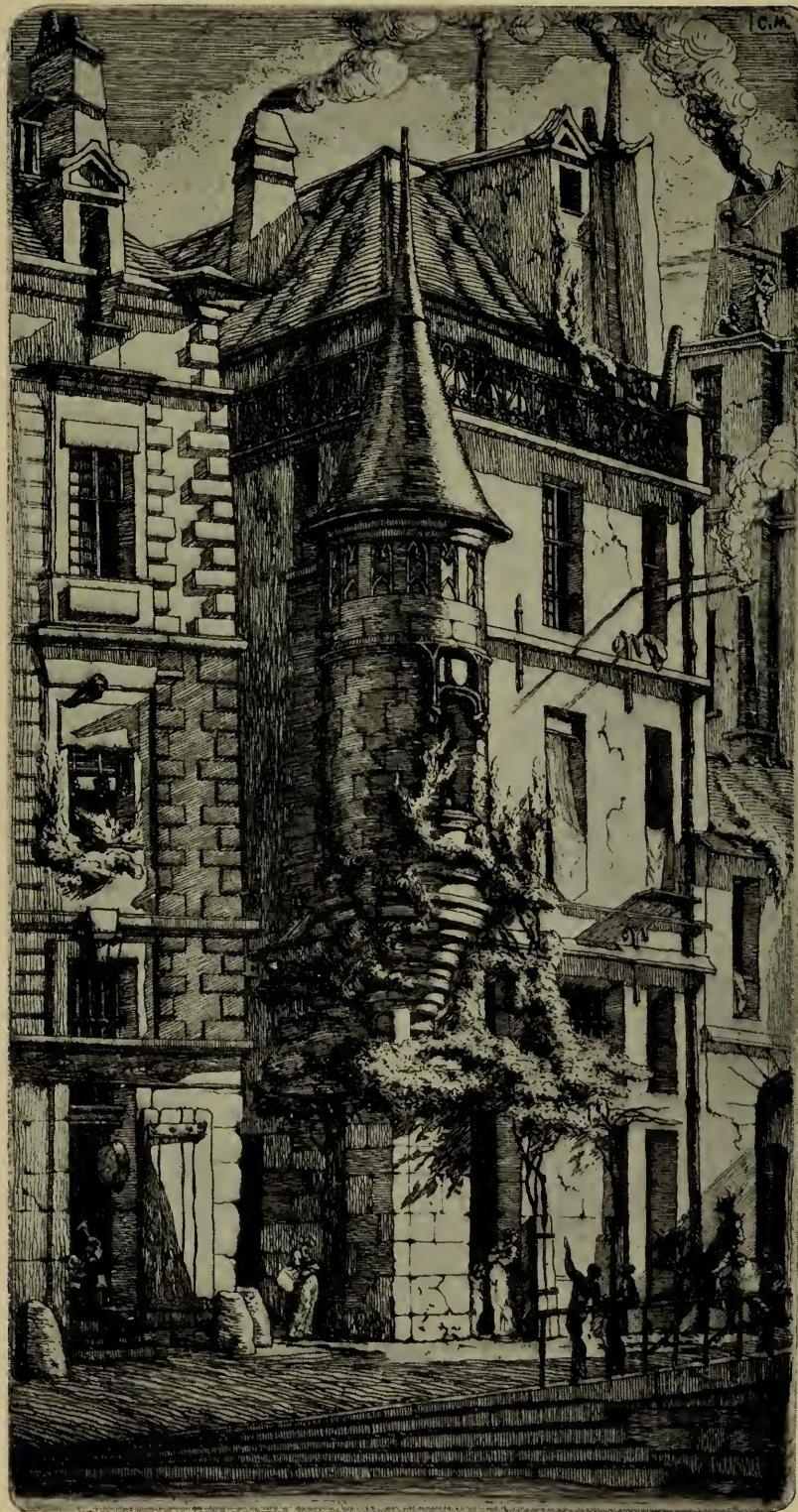
V. LA GALERIE DE NOTRE-DAME



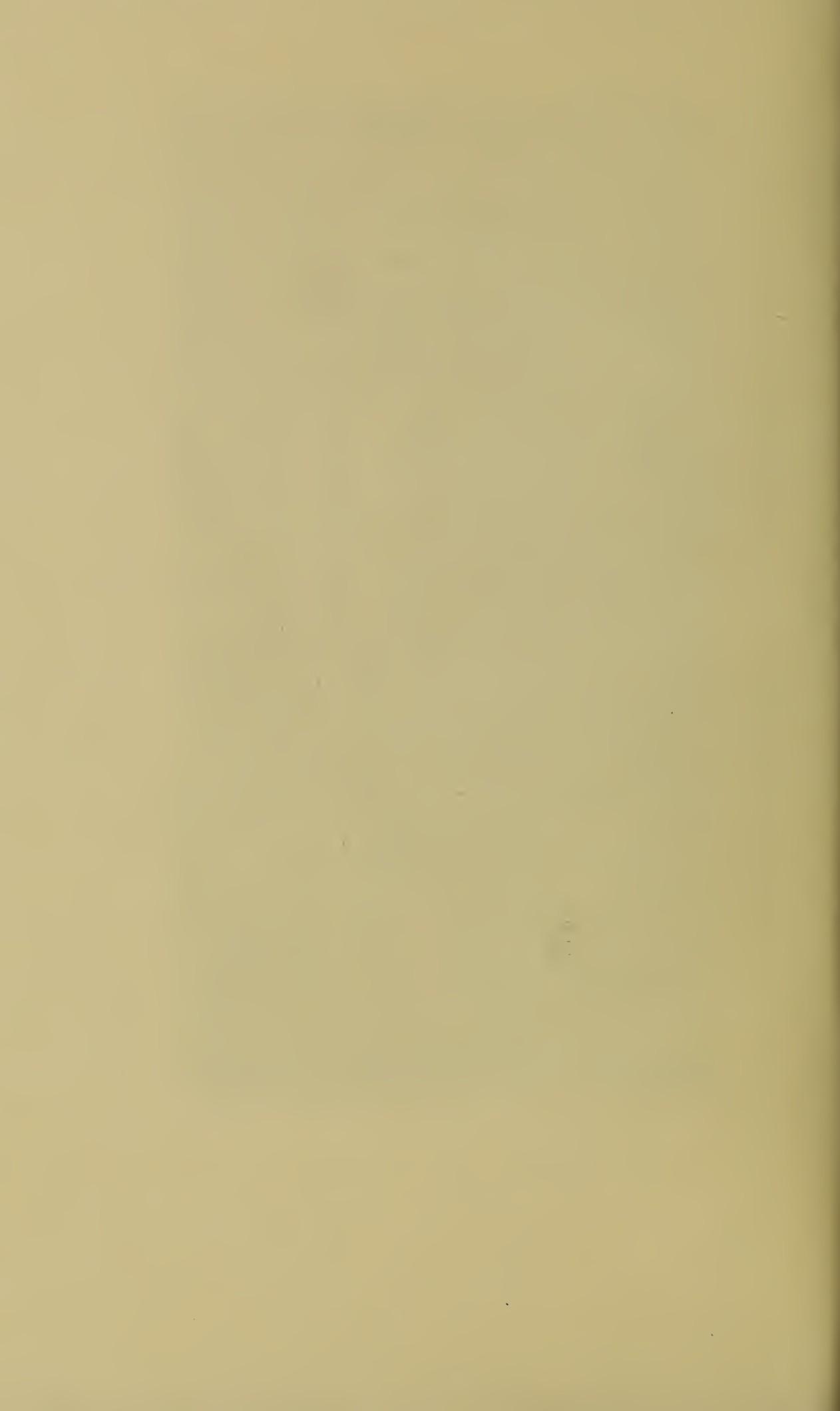
VI. LA RUE DES MAUVAIS GARÇONS

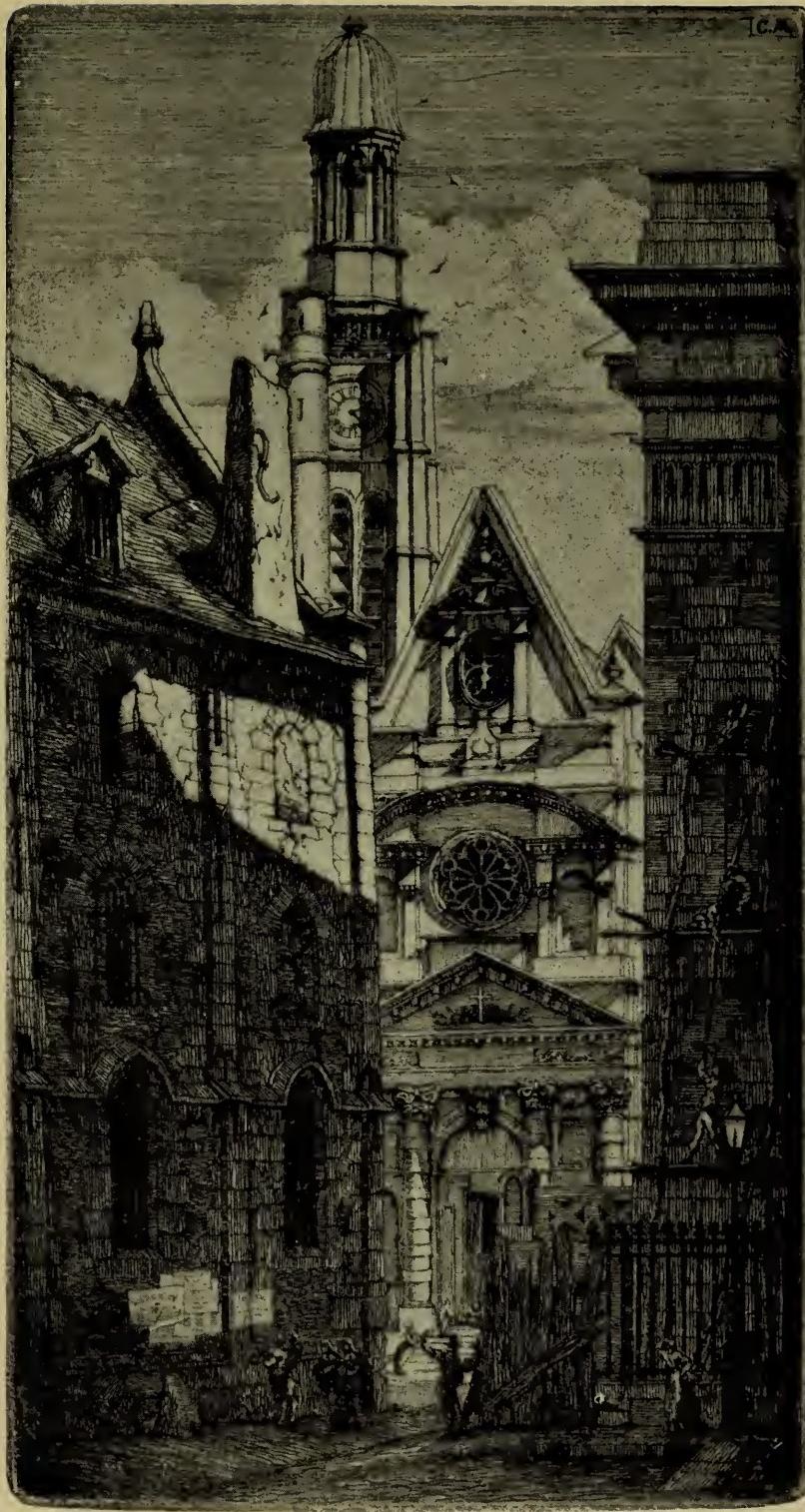


VII. LA TOUR DE L'HORLOGE

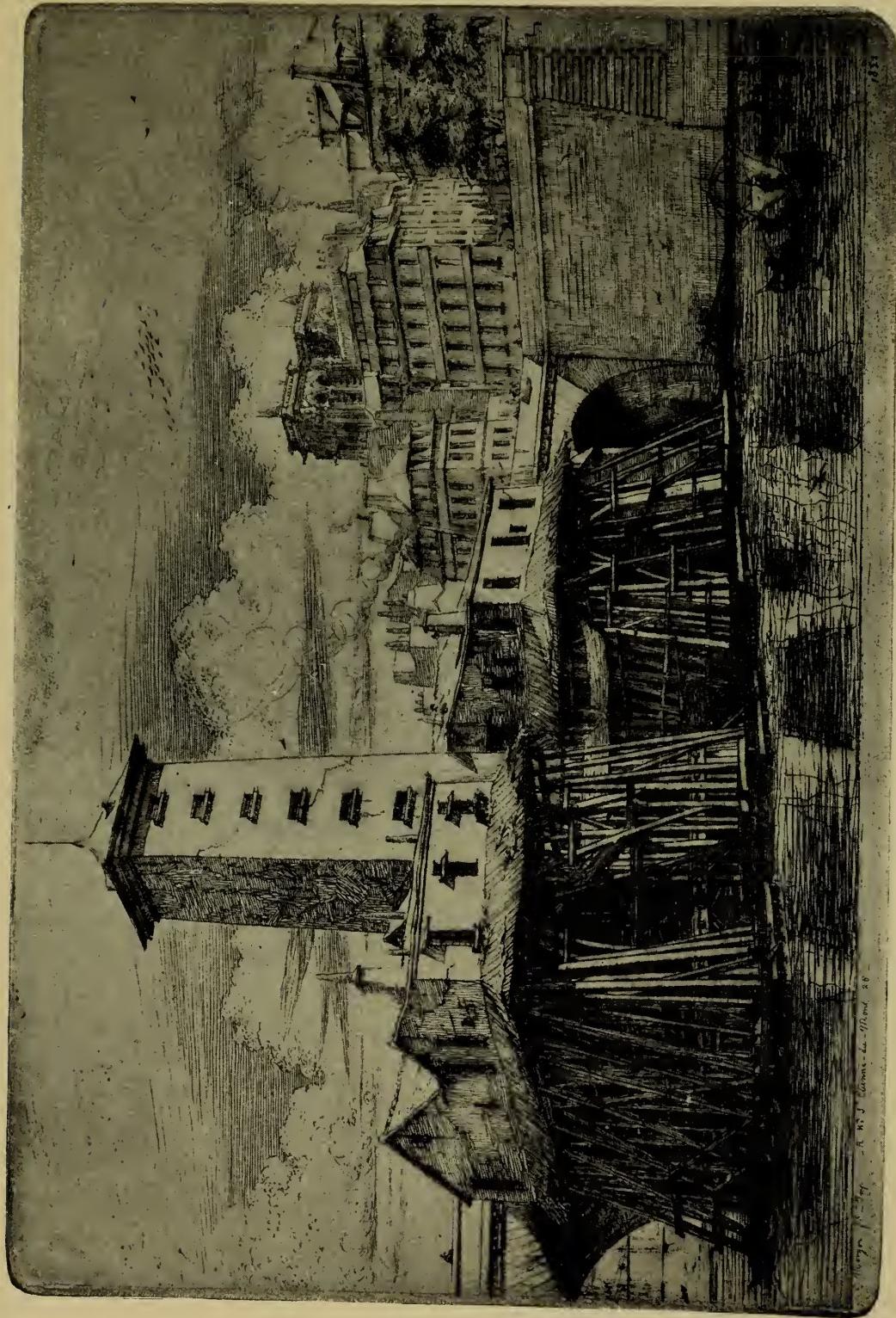


VIII. TOURELLE, RUE DE LA
TIXÉRANDERIE





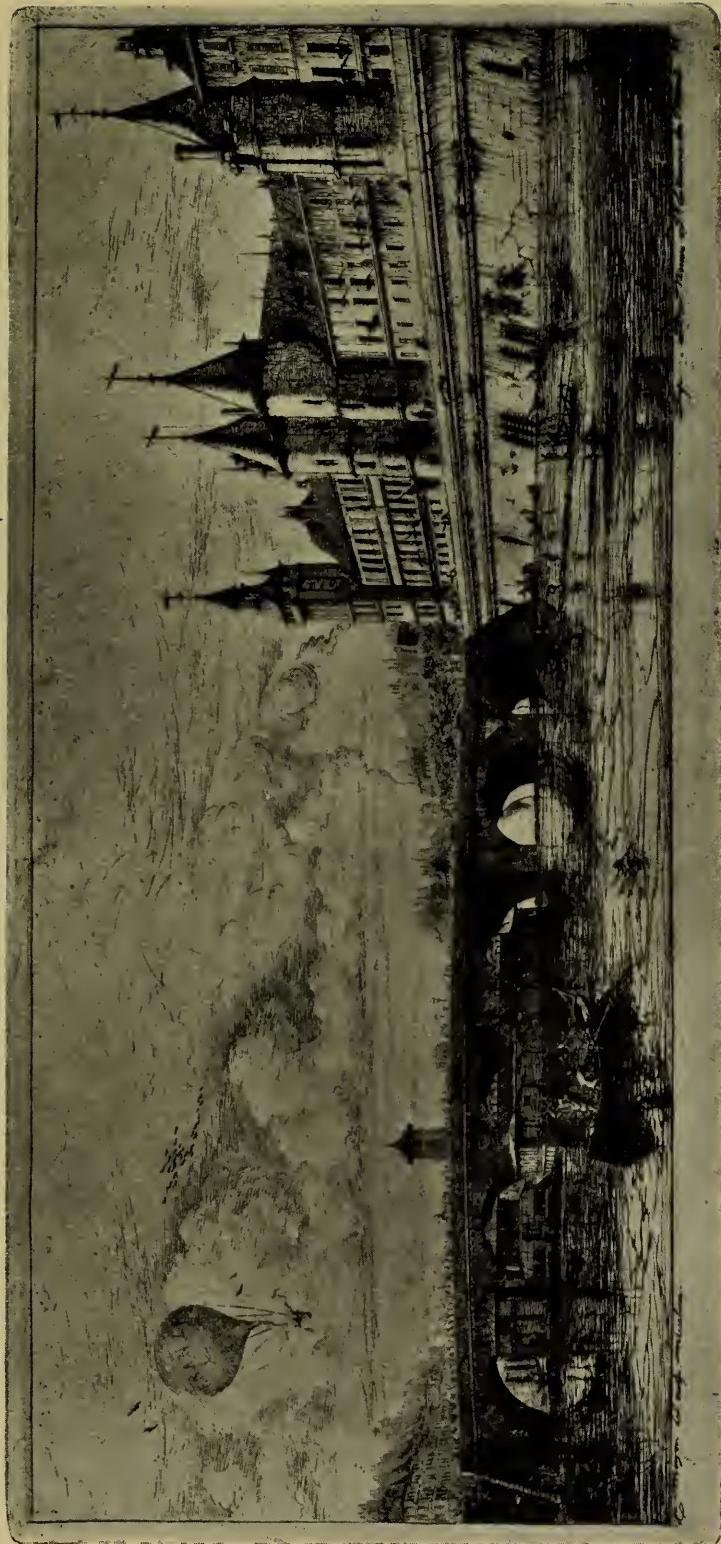
IX. SAINT-ÉTIENNE-DU-MONT



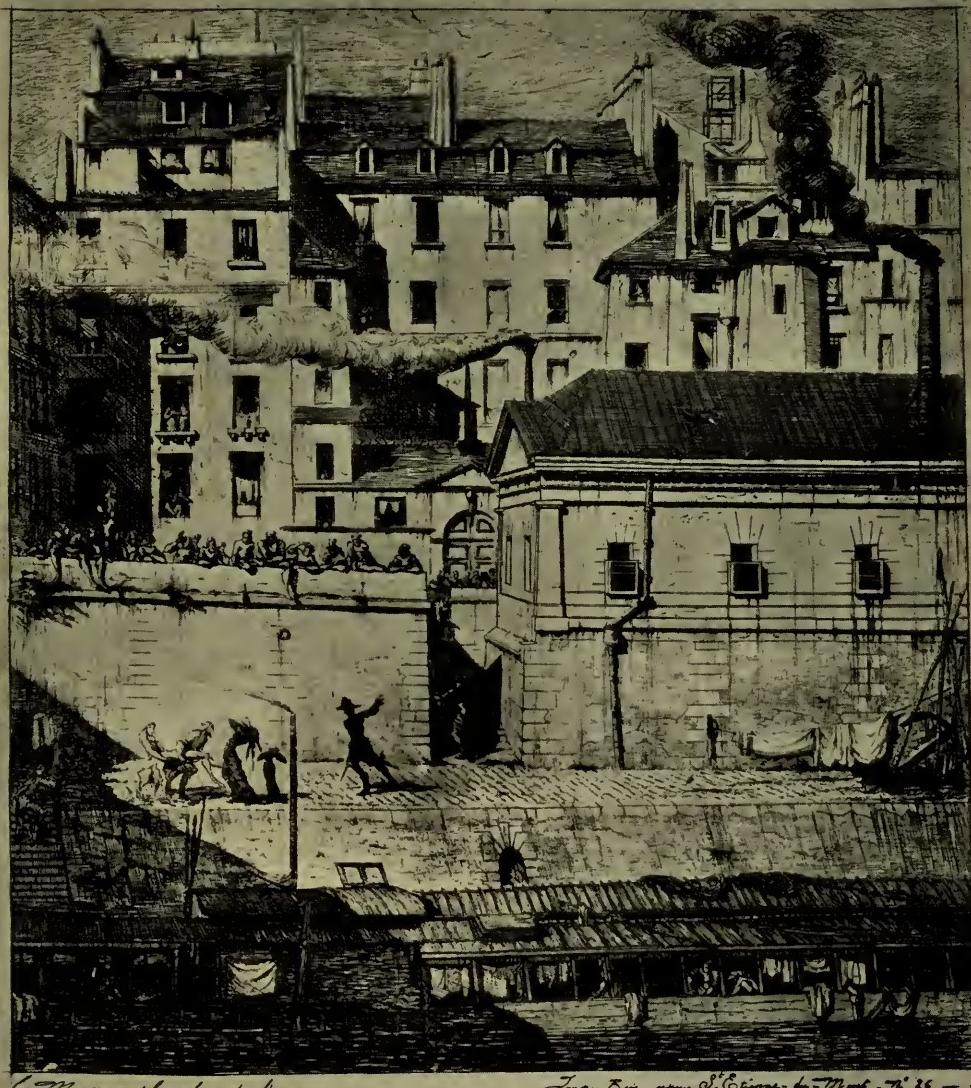
X. LA POMPE NOTRE-DAME



XI. LE PONT NEUF



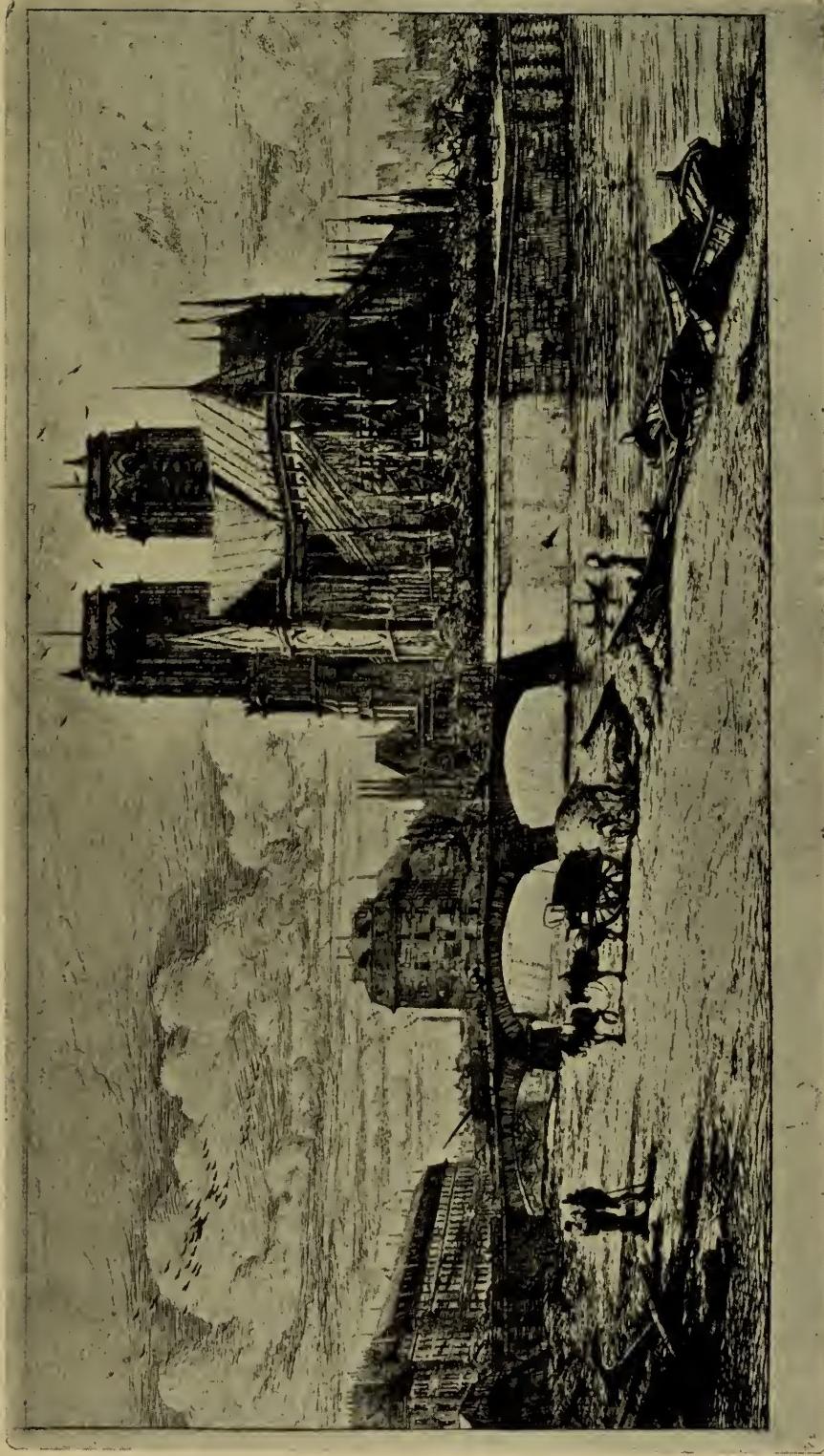
XII. LE PONT-AU-CHANGE



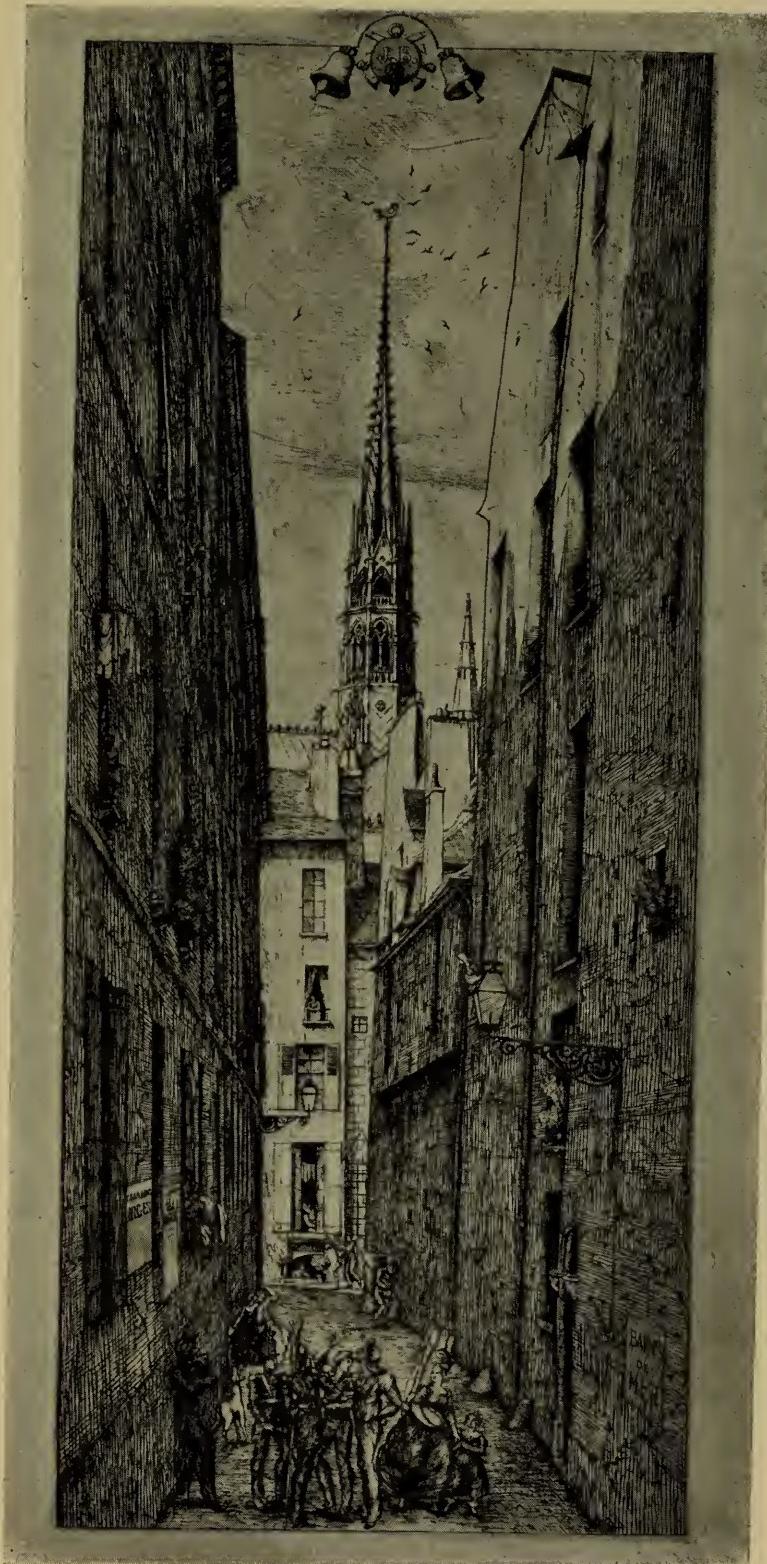
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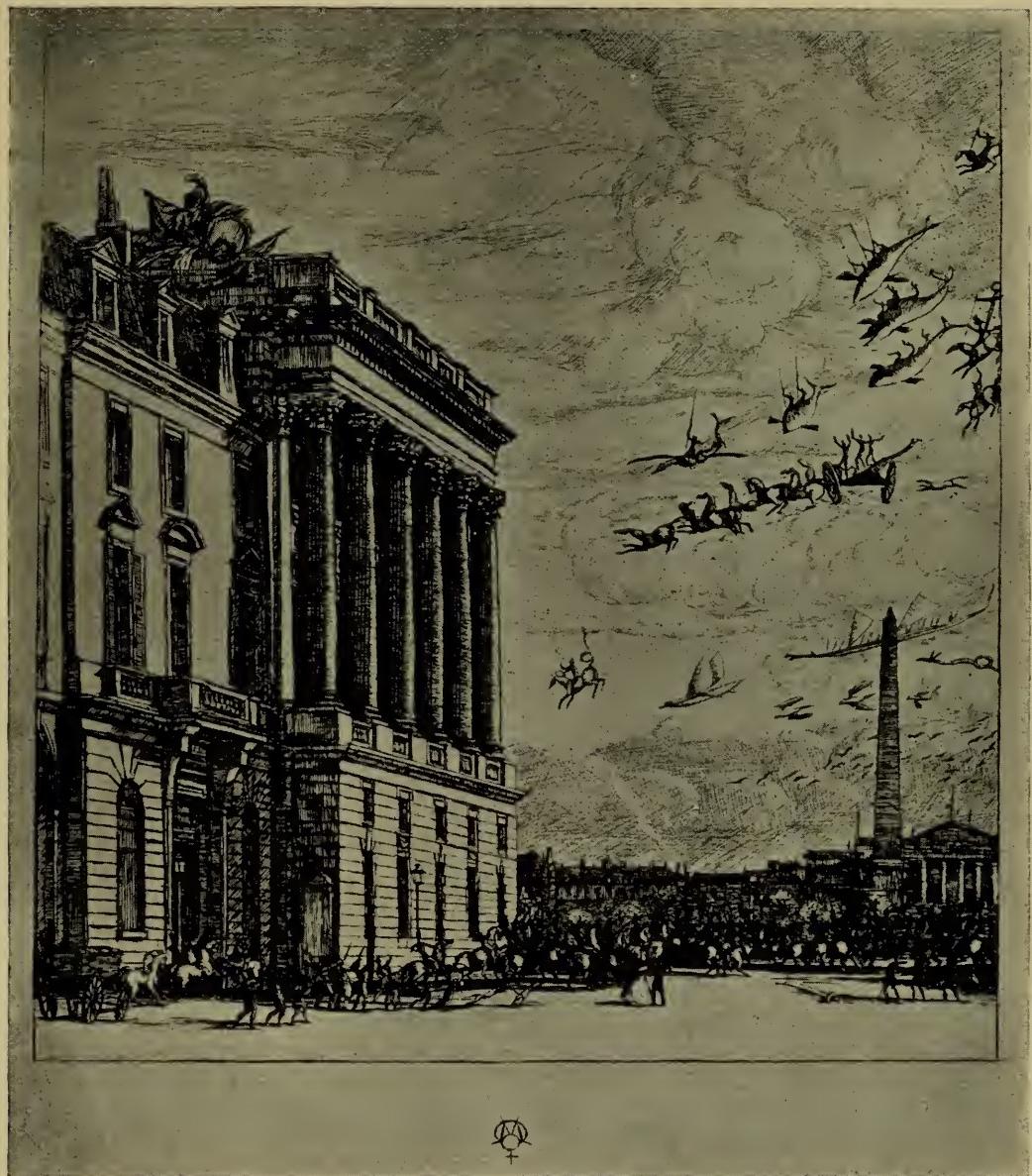
XIII. LA MORGUE



XIV. L'ABSIDE DE NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS

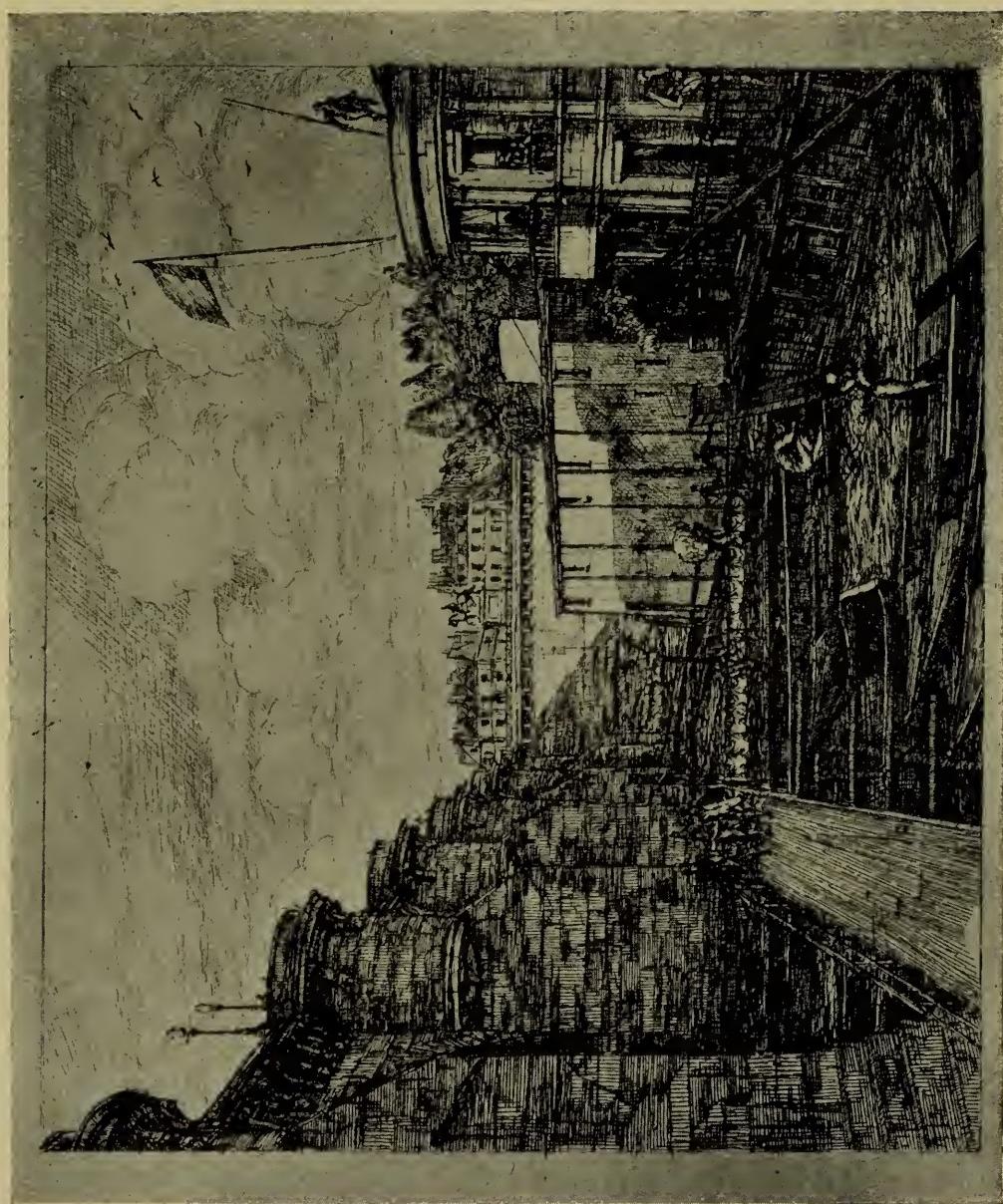


XV. RUE DES CHANTRES

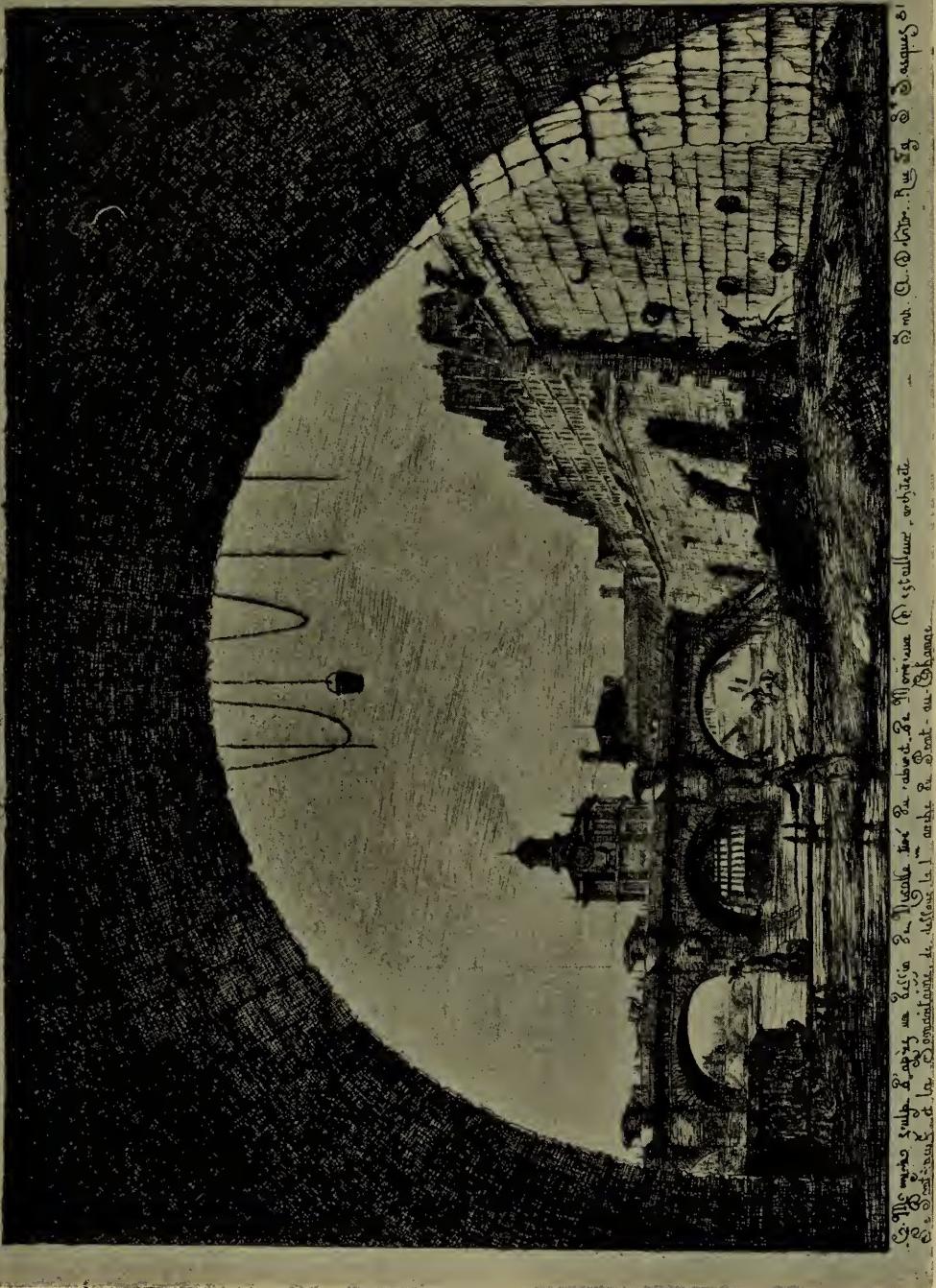


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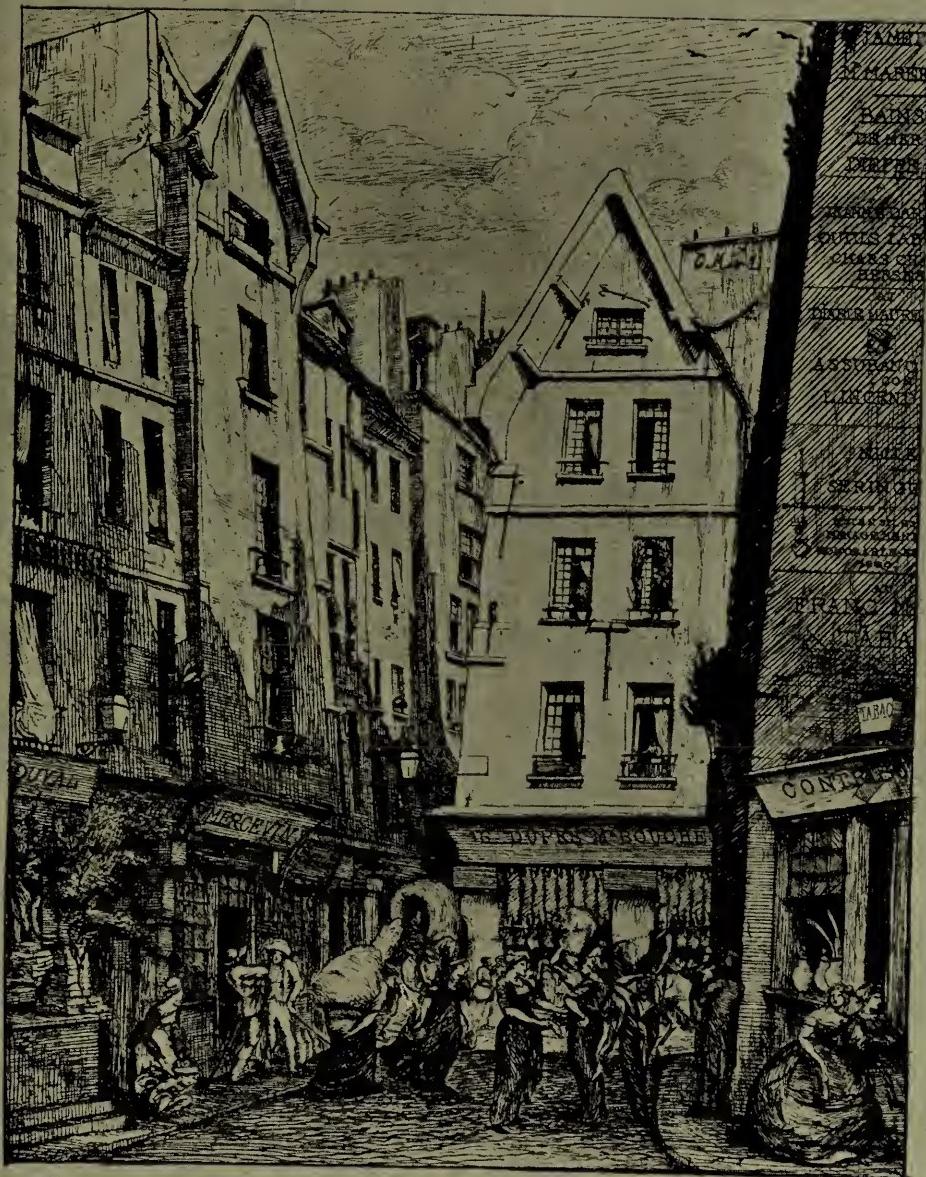
XVI. LE MINISTÈRE DE LA MARINE



XVII. BAIN FROID, CHEVRIER



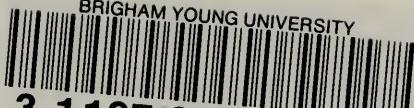
XVIII. LE PONT NEUF ET LA SAMARITAINE
VUE AU DESSOUS DE LA PREMIÈRE
ARCHE DU PONT-AU-CHANGE



RUE PIROUETTE
1860.

XIX. RUE PIROUETTE

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